From TikTok to Terrorism? The Online Radicalization of European Lone Attackers since October 7, 2023

By Nicolas Stockhammer

The October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel marked a pivotal moment not only in Middle East security policy but also in the global Islamist and particularly jihadi propaganda landscape. This article examines how the ensuing digital "victimhood-revenge" narrative rapidly spread across platforms like TikTok, fueling a new wave of radicalization among adolescents in Europe. Drawing on six European case studies from 2023 to 2025—including foiled and executed attacks in Vienna, Solingen, and Zurich—this article identifies a recurring radicalization pattern involving emotionally vulnerable, digitally native individuals exposed to algorithm-driven Islamist content in social media, but predominantly on TikTok. The analysis conceptualizes this process through the lens of a "Virtual Caliphate Complex" and explores TikTok's role as a low-threshold gateway into extremist ecosystems. By analyzing cross-platform mobilization dynamics, aesthetic framing, and the hybridization of lone-actor terrorism with online support networks, the article underscores the urgency of adapting P/CVE strategies to algorithmic environments. The conclusion suggests possible policy emphasis on content moderation, digital literacy, and platform accountability—particularly in the context of the European Union's Digital Services Act legislation. The article contends that today's prevailing Islamist radicalization pattern reflects not only ideological motivations but also youth-online-culture dynamics and algorithmic influence.

The October 7, 2023 attack against Israel marked a watershed moment not only in the escalation of violence in the Middle East but also in the global jihadi propaganda matrix.[1] Immediately, radical Islamist and jihadi propagandists launched a potent "victimhood-revenge" narrative that was rapidly disseminated across digital platforms.[2] Within hours of the initial attack and the subsequent Israeli counteroffensive, they began framing the events through the lens of victimhood, occupation, and defense of the *umma*.[3] Social media platforms—especially TikTok, Telegram, Instagram, and X—were flooded with images and videos from Gaza, often faked or stripped of context and repackaged with emotionally charged slogans, Qur'anic references, and graphic calls for revenge.[4] Hashtags such as #GazaUnderAttack, #FreePalestine, and #MuslimBrothersInGaza were co-opted by salafi-jihadi influencers to increase visibility among broader Muslim audiences, particularly adolescents. The framing of the war in Gaza as a Western-backed "genocidal" war against Islam served to intensify the perceived moral urgency of jihad, with many posts suggesting that passivity was equivalent to complicity.[5] This message resonated strongly with disaffected or already ideologically primed individuals in the West, some of whom viewed the unfolding conflict as a personal call to action or, as Alexander Ritzmann coined it, a "tribal call to arms."[a]

Crucially, jihadi propaganda portrayed local attacks in Europe as retaliation against direct accomplices of the "Zionist enemy," not as isolated acts of violence, but as acts of transnational solidarity and religious duty."[6] This catalyzed a new wave of online radicalization, particularly among digitally native, under-25 audiences.[7] The dynamic gave rise to a hybrid mobilization dynamic, blending traditional anti-colonial, antisemitic, and pan-Islamist narratives with high-speed, algorithm-driven dissemination models.[8] Without doubt, this has led to a significant expansion of the digital recruitment pool and lowered the threshold for ideological entry into jihadi milieus—especially among lone actors.[9] Salafi-jihadi groups have leveraged this renewed momentum to disseminate a form of a "virtual caliphate,"[10] not only through seemingly innocuous Islamist content on platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, 4Chan, and Reddit, but also via overtly violent jihadi propaganda circulated through Telegram channels and other encrypted communication platforms.[11] On a "lower extremist scale," self-declared Islamist online "influencer preachers" are increasingly emerging as central figures in the phenomenon often referred to as "TikTok radicalization."[12]

This massive digital shift aligns with the broader trend that transnational terrorism in the 2020s has become ubiquitous.[13] Particularly within the jihadi attack spectrum, terrorist acts are no longer confined to major European urban environments but are now occurring even in medium-sized towns and small municipalities, some of them in Germany, Belgium, France, and elsewhere. A

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a On January 4, 2024, the Islamic State issued a direct call for a global campaign of violence. In an audio message titled "And Kill Them Wherever You Overtake Them," the group's official spokesperson, Abu Hudhayfah al-Ansari, urged followers to carry out attacks against Christian and Jewish targets. He explicitly instructed Islamic State militants to make no distinction between civilian and military "apostates," reinforcing the group's commitment to indiscriminate violence. See also Muhammad Makmun Rasyid, "How global fatwas on Gaza challenge national religious authority," Middle East Monitor, June 1, 2025; Alexander Ritzmann, "A Tribal Call to Arms: Propaganda and What PVE Can Learn from Anthropology, Psychology and Neuroscience," VOX-Pol, January 2, 2024.

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striking recent example is Villach, a mid-sized Austrian city in the state of Carinthia with approximately 65,000 inhabitants— best known for its carnival tradition and local ice hockey derbies. In mid-February 2025, Villach suddenly made international headlines when an Islamist-inspired knife attack occurred, allegedly committed by a self-radicalized Syrian asylum seeker. For many observers, the attack there was completely surprising, as Villach is not known for hosting a significant Islamist scene. Yet, the incident raised urgent questions about online radicalization on spaces like TikTok and its impact on extremist violence. Initial evidence suggests that the attacker may have undergone a process of TikTok radicalization.[14]

The constant availability and proliferation of extremist content online has increased substantially and is now easily accessible.[15] The range of such content spans from initially low-threshold and seemingly harmless life advice delivered in Q&A-style videos by salafi influencer preachers (e.g., "Should one shake hands with unbelievers?") to brutal execution footage released by Islamic State militants.[16] Jihadi terrorist organizations have continuously expanded their capabilities in the digital sphere[17] and increasingly use the virtual space to propagate their extremist ideology, often framed through grievance and victimhood narratives that should justify revenge and violence.[18] At the same time, demand for such content has grown steadily, particularly among digitally native demographics such as Generation Z and Generation Alpha.[19]

The threat emanating from Europe today is no longer just about the possible return of foreign terrorist fighters or transnationally active, structured local extremist networks. Conceivably, it is shaped by a pernicious convergence of religiously motivated extremist ideology, digital platform mechanisms, and contemporary Western online youth culture. What is emerging is not merely the diffusion of radical content, but the progressive cultural normalization of extremist narratives, articulated through online formats that align with the affective and identity-forming dynamics of a digitally native youth. This convergence has transformed contemporary jihadism into a fluid, networked, and increasingly aestheticized movement— one capable of inspiring violence not through clandestine training camps, but through swipeable videos, viral slogans, and online 'tribalism.' Dealing with such a new threat landscape, Europe's counterterrorism challenge is therefore as much youth-cultural and algorithmic as it is operational and ideological.

To investigate this multifaceted dynamic in more detail, this article is organized into four main sections, each examining a distinct facet of contemporary Islamist/jihadi radicalization dynamics. Part I explores the concept of the Virtual Caliphate Complex, focusing on the decentralized and transnational nature of online jihadi ecosystems. Part II investigates the role of TikTok and short-form video platforms in shaping visual radicalization patterns, aesthetic appeal, and algorithmic amplification. Part III presents a selection of empirical case studies of European individual attackers since 2023, with verified indicators of online radicalization, including thwarted plots. Part IV provides a comparative analysis of these cases, identifying shared behavioral patterns, online platform trajectories, and ideological markers. The analysis concludes with a reflection on structural detection gaps and potential strategic implications for a more effective European/Western preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) policy.

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Part I: The "Virtual Caliphate Complex"

The virtual caliphate promoted by Islamic State outlets and affiliates has fundamentally transformed jihadi terrorism into a phenomenon that is decoupled from geography—enabled by global digital connectivity, encrypted communication, and on-demand propaganda.[20] It no longer refers to a territorial entity but to a transnational digital ecosystem: a loosely organized but (from the jihadi perspective) ideologically coherent online network, which operates on the macro level through shifting social media platforms and on the meso/micro levels via encrypted messaging apps. A wide variety of digital formats—ranging from propaganda videos, jihadi podcasts to sort of 'e-learning' modules on 3D-gun printing or bomb-making are increasingly replacing or complementing real-world interactions with propagandists, agitators, or recruiters. In such a manner, the jihadi digital value chain, i.e., the exploitation of online propaganda, virtual recruitment, and processing of attacks in closed communication spaces, is growing ever more fluid, autonomous, and globally diffused.[21]

The systemic complexity of the "virtual caliphate" rests on three key pillars: First, it aims at low-threshold engagement of individuals vulnerable to radicalization—particularly adolescents—through emotionally charged content, music, memes, and pop cultural aesthetics that are subtly or overtly aligned with jihadi ideology. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube serve as ideal vectors for these narrative framings, as they combine algorithmic virality with visual immediacy and cultural relatability.

Second, the virtual caliphate enables targeted selection and outreach to potential attackers via encrypted platforms such as Telegram or Rocket.Chat. These channels are often accompanied by "cyber coaching"[22] or even "plotting hubs,"[23] in which more experienced jihadi operatives provide virtual mission briefings or act as digital mentors. This pseudo-mentorship may include logistical advice, ideological justification, or psychological reinforcement, all delivered remotely and anonymously.

Third, this strategy constructs a transnational ideological identity space that allows even socially isolated or psychologically unstable individuals to feel embedded in a global jihadi struggle[24]—without the need for physical integration into real-world networks. In this way, the virtual caliphate functions not as a command structure, but as a decentralized ecosystem for ideological mobilization and operational facilitation.

This Islamist virtualization strategy, as a defining expression of what is increasingly referred to as "mutant jihadism,"[25] has profound implications for the contemporary threat landscape: It significantly lowers the barriers to entry into extremism, complicates law enforcement detection and prevention efforts, and enables asymmetric mobilization even in the absence of formal organizational structures. It also contributes to the rise of so-called 'do-it-yourself jihadis'—individuals who radicalize autonomously

through online content, operate independently, and can execute attacks within extremely short timeframes. Numerous recent cases across Europe exemplify this ongoing dynamic. A particularly illustrative example is the opportunistic lone actor attack in Villach mentioned earlier. The alleged perpetrator, Ahmad G., reportedly radicalized via TikTok and is said to have been triggered into violence by watching a specific piece of Islamist online propaganda. His exposure to this material likely increased his propensity for violence and may have served as a direct catalyst for the attack.

The rapid, borderless availability of such inciting content has enabled jihadi networks to efficiently expand the reach and influence of the 'virtual caliphate.' It adapts quickly to platform restrictions, evades traditional forms of surveillance, and empowers lone actors by connecting them to a transnational jihadi narrative— anytime, anywhere. In this regard, it is less a platform of hierarchical command than a flexible and resilient infrastructure for ideological mobilization, operational guidance, and psychological embedding.

Part II: TikTok as a Gateway

Social media platforms have become indispensable tools for extremist actors across ideological spectrums.[26] Their unrestricted global reach, low entry barriers, and capacity for anonymity make them ideal environments for spreading propaganda, recruiting followers, and exchanging operational knowledge. Extremists particularly exploit platforms with algorithm-driven content delivery—such as TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram—where emotionally charged or sensationalist material can quickly gain visibility. Short-form videos, memes, and similar stylized imagery allow radical messages to be disguised in appealing formats, making them especially effective for engaging younger, digitally native audiences.

This exploitation becomes most effective under specific conditions: during periods of geopolitical crisis, in politically polarized environments, and where digital literacy is low. Weak content moderation and poorly regulated or encrypted platforms further facilitate the spread of extremist narratives. In such an environment, social media serves not only as a broadcasting tool but as a powerful force multiplier—enabling the rapid radicalization of individuals, the creation of virtual ideological communities, and the decentralized planning of extremist acts.

TikTok is a Chinese short-form video platform launched globally in 2018 that enables users to create and engage with videos—mostly under a minute—across genres such as music, comedy, politics, and lifestyle. Driven by user-generated trends and a highly personalized algorithm, especially popular among Gen Z and Gen Alpha, TikTok aligns closely with current youth *zeitgeist*. Against this backdrop, its influence on adolescents has grown swiftly, turning it into both a powerful tool for creativity and, increasingly, a contested space for disinformation, populist messaging, and extremist propaganda.[27]

Social media platforms such as TikTok have emerged as critical first contact gateways for the radicalization of young individuals susceptible to all facets of extremist and radical Islamist ideologies in particular. Content creators strategically exploit TikTok's algorithm, its emotional aesthetics, and its popularity among adolescents to disseminate polarizing, ideologically charged material.[28] This includes martyrdom narratives, anti-Western rhetoric, and religious interpretations of global conflicts—particularly the war in Gaza.[29]

TikTok plays a seminal role in this digital radicalization ecosystem: It lowers the entry threshold,[30] amplifies identity-

based grievances, and connects teenage users with radical salafi symbolism (e.g., the raised index finger as gesture for *tawhid* or the celebratory grin of attackers such as the alleged Villach perpetrator),[31] ideological codes, and narrative shortcuts. Short-form videos blend radical Islamist as well as jihadi references, graphic content, and familiar cultural cues to create a virtual identity space for potential young attackers. Gradual exposure through comments, algorithms, and cross-platform links leads to recruitment and access to encrypted channels, sometimes via QR codes.[32]

The following paraphrased excerpt from an anonymized interrogation protocol of a teenager who had planned—but ultimately abandoned—a terrorist attack in Vienna in September 2023 illustrates how continuous exposure to extremist content on social media can significantly reinforce the radicalization process.[33] In his statement, the teenager describes how he was influenced by radical online propaganda. He claims that salafi online preachers convinced him that Muslims were "superior to non-believers" and that only the strictly observant would go to paradise. According to his statement, his radicalization was driven primarily by salafi and jihadi content on TikTok, while Instagram and Telegram served as platforms for networking with ideological peers and sharing footage of terrorist attacks. Furthermore, he recounts that he watched many videos of an Islamic State-affiliated hate preacher, which convinced him to become a follower of the Islamic State, believing it to be the "most religious group in the world." During the interrogation, he denied that the Islamic State would kill innocent people, claiming instead that it would target only non-believers. He aspired to become a martyr like them and decided to plan an attack. The teenager bought a knife guided by the intention to kill as many *kafir* (non-believers) as possible. He considered acquiring a gun but could not afford one. Also, the adolescent had planned to wear a fake suicide belt to instill fear and panic during the attack. His ultimate goal was to be shot by the police to become a martyr and go directly to paradise, where he imagined there would be only peace and no more conflict. He claimed that he boarded the subway intending to carry out the attack upon arrival but lost his courage at the last moment. Allegedly, he became afraid that he might not die in the attack and thus would not reach paradise.[34]

This hybrid form of radicalization—emotionalized, decentralized, and digitally embedded—poses a serious challenge for Western security services. The so-called 'TikTok Jihad' is no longer a fringe phenomenon but has evolved as a strategic toolkit component of the jihadi value chain.[35] Recent cases such as the foiled ISK-inspired Taylor Swift concert attack in Vienna (2024) illustrate convincingly how TikTok serves as an emotional incubator, catalyst, and ideological gateway, while Telegram becomes the operational communication space.[36] Security authorities across Europe now recognize TikTok not only as a tool of propaganda but as a direct accelerant of radicalization and operational readiness.[37]

Radicalization on TikTok

Radical Islamist hate preachers are increasingly leveraging TikTok to disseminate antisemitic, homophobic, and other extremist enemy narratives, alongside martyrdom myths and a rigid, binary worldview rooted in the strict dichotomy of "*halal*" versus "*haram*."[38] The content they promote advocates a strictly sharia-compliant way of life that is deliberately austere, deeply fundamentalist, and explicitly anti-modern—rejecting liberal Western values such as

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individual freedom, democracy, pluralism, and gender equality as corrupt, decadent, and incompatible with an alleged 'true' Islamic identity.[39] At first glance, this messaging appears paradoxical: highly stylized and digitally savvy in its format yet promoting an ideology that is deeply anti-modern. However, this contradiction is strategic rather than accidental. The modern aesthetic—short videos, viral music, meme culture, influencer language—is deliberately employed to lower access barriers and resonate with digitally native, identity-seeking youth.[40] Once engaged, viewers are gradually introduced to a rigid ideological framework that presents the rejection of modernity not as a loss, but as moral superiority and spiritual clarity. A deceitful sleek digital packaging thus serves as a gateway into a worldview that ultimately demands the wholesale rejection of the very cultural environment it initially mimics.

The rise of radical salafi online influencer preachers marks a pivotal shift in the way Islamist ideologies—particularly those aligned with the violent salafi-jihadi spectrum—are disseminated, consumed, and internalized by young, often digitally native audiences.[41] These figures blend religious authority with the aesthetics of digital populism, delivering highly stylized content via social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Telegram. Such activities also generate revenue. Notably, the presence of crowdfunding and donation links on many of these accounts indicate that TikTok is increasingly leveraged as a promotional tool for fundraising and financial support[42]—not only for ideological outreach, but also for the personal benefit of the preachers themselves, who often market pilgrimage packages, *halal* products, or other religiously branded goods.

TikTok's Problematic Messengers

When it comes to radicalization, the major challenge with TikTok is that users themselves, especially the self-declared "preachers," produce their problematic content, akin to a "do-it-yourself *dawa*"—a form of religious outreach or proselytizing that individuals essentially carry out on their own.[43] Unlike traditional mosque-based *dawa*, their digital preaching is personalized, emotionally charged, and algorithmically amplified, allowing them to potentially reach millions of users across linguistic, national, and cultural boundaries. The salafi TikTokers messaging often operates within the gray zone between legality and radicalization, making it especially challenging for regulatory or intelligence frameworks to address.

Some of the most prominent figures in this space are Abul Baraa (104,000 followers on TikTok); Marcel Krass (160,000 on Instagram, 91,000 on YouTube, and 13,000 followers on TikTok, where he has recently been more active); Deran A., known as

"Abdelhamid" (580,000 followers on TikTok); and Ibrahim El Azzazi (600,000 followers on TikTok)—all German-speaking salafi online preachers with extensive reach among youth audiences in Europe.[44]

Abul Baraa, widely known within the German-speaking radical salafi scene, is notorious for theological justifications of religiously motivated violence, the rejection of democracy, and antisemitic or anti-Western nuances couched in religious rhetoric.[45] This "rock star" among the German-speaking salafi influencer preachers promotes an intimidating interpretation of Islam, marked by threatening undertones, in which—according to his rhetoric—individuals are granted little to no legitimate personal autonomy.[46] He reportedly dismisses the life choices of those who do not strictly adhere to Islamic commandments as invalid or inferior.[47] His content appears to remain mostly within the boundaries of what is legally permissible but is frequently referenced in jihadi contexts, including in legal proceedings involving radicalized individuals.[48] Marcel Krass, although presenting himself as more moderate in tone, has propagated similar narratives, particularly around the rejection of Western political systems, gender roles, and Islamic orthopraxy.[49] Both individuals are frequently named in jihadi investigation files as influential voices in the radicalization histories of young suspects.[50]

The third highly relevant persona, "Abdelhamid," an Islamist "TikTok star" gained notoriety in a recent trial in Düsseldorf: He is alleged to have pocketed donations for children in need on a grand scale.[51] The North Rhine-Westphalia Office for the Protection of the Constitution describes "Abdelhamid" as a top salafi online influencer with hundreds of thousands of followers and 10 million likes—a lifestyle preacher in a sports jersey who radicalizes young people.[52] Ibrahim El-Azzazi, the fourth significant person in this category, has more than 600,000 followers on TikTok, where he is known as "Sheik Ibrahim."[53] The preacher, who grew up in Munich, had been under surveillance by the Bavarian Office for the Protection of the Constitution.[54] According to the authorities El-Azzazi espouses "anti-democratic, misogynistic, and homophobic views."[55]

What distinguishes these preachers from traditional religious authorities is not merely their ideology but their comprehensible use of modern digital communication. Their videos, livestreams, and interactive formats employ techniques common to influencers: direct eye contact, emotional storytelling, relatable language, and rapid-response interaction with viewers. They simplify complex theological concepts and link them to everyday struggles of identity, discrimination, or personal crisis. The result is a highly adaptable and seemingly authentic message that is deeply resonant with alienated or identity-seeking youth,[56] especially those from Muslim diaspora communities.[57] This modern media-affine approach makes them "valuable" ideological bridges between mainstream conservative Islam, radical Islamism, and jihadi radicalism.[58]

Crucially, these preachers do not typically call for violence directly. Rather, they create a radical Islamist 'environment' in which dichotomous thinking, exclusivist religious identity, and resentment toward Western norms are normalized and theologically legitimized. In this atmosphere, jihadi propaganda can flourish, as it builds on the ideological foundations laid by such influencers. Repeatedly, jihadi attackers or suspects in recent years have cited initial exposure to online preachers such as Abul Baraa as an early stage in their radicalization process—before transitioning
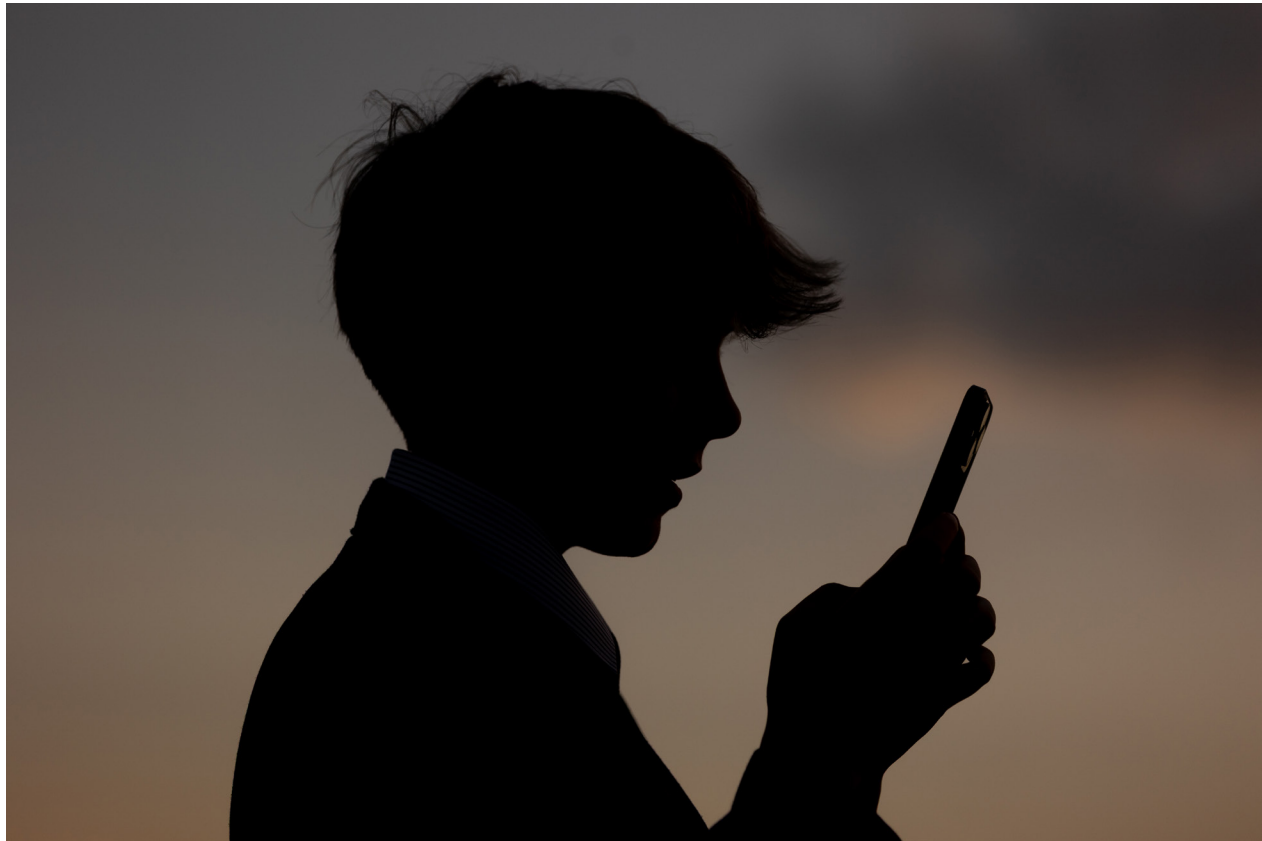
A teenage boy looks at a iPhone screen display on May 21, 2025. (Anna Barclay/Getty Images)

to encrypted channels or more explicit jihadi content.[59] In this sense, radical salafi influencer preachers function as gatekeepers or facilitators of ideological escalation, making them a critical node in the hybrid radicalization pathway that increasingly defines the terrorist threat landscape in Europe.

The TikTok Dilemma

German domestic intelligence agencies have issued warnings that TikTok functions as a "radicalization accelerant" for vulnerable youth.[60] While the use of social media by Islamists is not a new phenomenon, the agencies emphasized that the app TikTok—due to its "addictive potential" driven by constantly refreshed, algorithm-based video suggestions—had led to a "dramatic acceleration" of radicalization.[61]

In response to such risks, the European Union is establishing age restrictions for TikTok referring to child protection reasons. In several states such as India, China, and Pakistan, access is either temporarily banned or heavily restricted due to national security concerns.[62] Consequently, TikTok has taken measures—through automated moderation, NGO partnerships, and policy updates—to reduce the spread of extremist content.[63] The European Digital Services Act (DSA) can be regarded as a game-changing enforcement tool in this context: For the first time, TikTok must legally assess, mitigate, and be audited on systemic risks, including online radicalization. The European Commission has launched formal investigations under the DSA, examining TikTok's handling of youth protection, harmful content, addictive algorithmic design, and election-related risks.[64] TikTok continues to struggle with detecting coded or "softer" Islamist content, such as charismatic preachers who use religious language to promote radical ideas. Content removal is often delayed, especially for non-English or regional-language videos.

As right- and left-wing extremists also try to exploit the social media platform, which is particularly popular among young people, the trend is most pronounced in radical Islamist circles. TikTok plays a "central role" in the staging and dissemination of Islamist content.[65] Meanwhile, the platform's algorithm may amplify borderline material, exposing vulnerable youth to extremist narratives tied to identity, belonging, or grievance. Through ongoing exposure to algorithmically promoted content and interaction with salafi online influencer preachers, users—especially susceptible adolescents—are potentially drawn into increasingly extreme ideological ecosystems. This process is often facilitated not only by public posts but also by anonymous users operating in comment sections, livestreams, or encrypted group chats. Sometimes, within a few hours, users may be confronted with highly problematic material or even be invited—through links on TikTok—to encrypted chat formats.[b] A common next step in this radicalization trajectory involves direct invitations to migrate to alternative platforms such as Instagram, Telegram, or Rocket.Chat.[66] Online environments such as these offer more privacy and lower levels of content

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b   One Austrian investigative journalist has reported troubling insights into the immersive dynamics of TikTok-driven radicalization, documenting how rapidly users can be exposed to extremist content and how such material is algorithmically promoted and reinforced within the platform's ecosystem. See Leo Eiholzer, "Das Jihadisten–Protokoll: Auf TikTok gerät man in drei Stunden von Katzenvideos in eine Terroristen Chat–Gruppe," *NEWS* (Vol. 9), February 27, 2025, pp. 21-26.

moderation,[c] which makes them attractive for the continuation of communication in closed or encrypted channels. Such "safe spaces" provide fertile ground for harder to monitor indoctrination, ideological reinforcement, and even operational planning.

Platform migration remains a serious challenge in the radicalization process—where ideological exposure facilitates more opportunities for deeper commitment and exposure to content or interactions that lay the groundwork for terrorism. In this environment, users have opportunities to become active participants in clandestine digital subcultures, where ideological boundaries blur and violent action is increasingly framed as a legitimate and even obligatory expression of faith. Thus, TikTok is not merely a platform for ideological outreach—it can serve as a gateway to a broader radicalization infrastructure that extends across digital ecosystems.

While other platforms also play roles in extremist recruitment, TikTok's design and demographic focus amplify risks for youth, supported by both case evidence and expert analysis.[67] However, radicalization increasingly continues across platforms; TikTok frequently serves as the gateway rather than the sole venue. The German Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (BfV) has also called for closer monitoring of digital radicalization patterns, particularly among socially isolated individuals with migration backgrounds, and warned of the increasing role of TikTok in jihadi recruitment across Europe.[68]

Part III: Case Studies of Lone Actors and Online-Driven Attacks (2023-2025)

The selected six attack cases (both foiled and executed) span four Western European countries (Austria, Germany, Belgium, and Switzerland) from 2023 to 2025, demonstrating a growing trend of TikTok-linked radicalization. They involve varied attack types, backed by investigations confirming TikTok exposure. Common features include young perpetrators under 25 who self-radicalized mainly through TikTok where they had been exposed to radical Islamist content from salafi influencers. TikTok's algorithm may have accelerated their move from passive viewing to violence, with many shifting to encrypted messaging apps such as Telegram for deeper indoctrination.

Vienna, Austria – Foiled Attack on Pride Parade (June 2023)
In June 2023, Austrian security authorities foiled a jihadi terrorist plot targeting the Vienna Pride Parade, a major LGBTQ event held annually in the Austrian capital.[69] The three suspects—a 14-year-old of Chechen descent and two brothers aged 17 and 20 of Bosnian origin, all residing in Lower Austrian capital St. Pölten—were arrested on June 17, just days before the parade.[70] The group had reportedly planned to carry out a coordinated assault involving an AK-47 assault rifle, a machete, and potentially a vehicle-ramming attack.[71] In preparation for the attack, the 14-year-old suspect reportedly used the encrypted messaging app Threema to request bomb-making instructions from an unknown online contact.[72] In response, he received a link to detailed instructions.

Omar Haijawi-Pirchner, head of Austria's State Protection and Intelligence Directorate (DSN), stated that the individuals had radicalized themselves on TikTok, noting that their profile closely aligned with the target demographic of certain salafi online preachers: "The suspects belong exactly to the target audience of these preachers. They are young and self-radicalized via TikTok or other social media platforms."[73] The now 19-year-old suspect reportedly adopted Islamic State ideology as early as March 2022, actively promoting it on platforms such as TikTok and Telegram, as well as through his PlayStation profile, where he glorified the group and disseminated its ideology.[74]

According to investigative findings, the youngest suspect did not merely consume jihadi "TikToks;" he consequently actively engaged in creating, curating, and disseminating content via Telegram, essentially moving from passive consumer to propagandist. Investigations revealed that he allegedly established a Telegram channel for jihadi networking, fundraised for weapons, and planned to travel to ISK territory in Afghanistan.[75] His radicalization pathway exemplifies how TikTok increasingly serves as a soft entry zone, from which vulnerable teens are drawn into more secure and operational platforms (e.g., Telegram, Threema). The plot also offers a sobering illustration of how jihadi propaganda increasingly resonates with a new, very young generation (teenagers) of digital natives.

Brussels, Belgium – Shooting Attack (October 2023)
On October 16, 2023, a 45-year-old Tunisian national, Abdesalem Lassoued, perpetrated a terrorist shooting in Brussels, fatally targeting two Swedish nationals and wounding a third.[76] All three victims were reportedly enroute to a UEFA EURO 2024 qualification match, visibly identifiable by their yellow Swedish football jerseys.[77] The attack occurred in the context of growing hostility toward Sweden, which had intensified over several months following public burnings of the Qur'an—first by far-right activist Rasmus Paludan and later by Iraqi protester Salwan Momika.[78] As a result, Sweden increasingly became a symbolic target in jihadi narratives. In this context, Magnus Ranstorp, a Swedish terrorism researcher, noted, "We are among the top countries in the West perceived as being at war with Islam and identified as priority targets."[79]

The attacker, who was illegally residing in Belgium after prior convictions and a failed asylum claim in Italy, was already known to Belgian authorities.[80] Critically, investigators later confirmed his recent activity on TikTok, where he had consumed videos promoting radical Islamist narratives, including claims about Sweden's alleged mistreatment of Muslim children—a conspiracy theory widely circulating in Arabic-language videos at the time.[81]

The attacker's ideological motivation was clearly articulated in a video message he posted shortly before the attack, in which he pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. He claimed that he "targeted Swedes" as "revenge in the name of Muslims" allegedly oppressed by Western governments, specifically citing Sweden.[82] The narrative he referenced—that Swedish authorities were removing Muslim children from their families to "Christianize" them—had been widely amplified on TikTok and Telegram, often in highly emotional and decontextualized formats.[83] While there is no evidence of direct contact with Islamic State operatives, the attack aligns with the model of 'inspired terrorism'—acts carried out independently but ideologically aligned with jihadi groups.[84] The Islamic State later claimed responsibility via its official channels, hailing the attacker

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c   Since the start of Trump's second administration, Instagram's content moderation has shifted toward a more permissive, user-driven model—marked by the removal of fact-checkers, relaxed hate speech policies, and reduced proactive enforcement—while remaining subject to E.U. oversight under the Digital Services Act. See Jess Weatherbed, "Meta abandons fact-checking on Facebook and Instagram in favor of Community Notes," Verge, January 7, 2025.

as a "soldier of the Caliphate."[85]

The attack prompted high-level political discussions in both Belgium and across the European Union, focusing on systemic failures in addressing radicalization, shortcomings in deportation and asylum enforcement mechanisms, and the increasingly critical role of social media platforms in amplifying jihadi propaganda and facilitating online mobilization.[86] The Brussels case strikingly illustrates that social media platforms like TikTok can serve as entry points into (more) extreme ideological spheres. While the perpetrator did not match the typical 'teenage TikTok jihadi' profile age-wise, his case shows that the platform's algorithmic exposure model can radicalize even older individuals—especially when conspiratorial content intersects with identity-based grievance.

Zurich, Switzerland – Knife Attack (March 2024)

In March 2024, a 14-year-old male of Swiss-Tunisian background carried out a brutal knife attack in central Zurich, severely injuring an Orthodox Jewish man in what authorities described as a religiously motivated and explicitly antisemitic assault.[87] The teenage attacker stabbed the man multiple times, leaving him critically injured. Passersby managed to overpower the assailant, who continued to issue threats, declaring it was his Muslim duty to kill Jews.[88] Witnesses told the Jewish magazine *Tachles* that he allegedly shouted: "I am Swiss. I am Muslim. I'm here to kill Jews." According to *20 Minuten*, he also yelled "Allahu Akbar" and "Death to all Jews."[89] The victim survived the attack, but the incident sent shockwaves through Switzerland due to the young age of the perpetrator, the clear jihadi motive, and the weaponization of antisemitic narratives.[90]

The assailant reportedly declared his motivation to be religious, framing the act as part of his perceived duty to defend Islam against its enemies.[91] Investigators soon discovered that the teenager was not merely exposed to extremist ideas but was deeply embedded in a growing online subculture known as "Alt-Jihad" (also known as "Islamogram")—a digital phenomenon inspired by the far-right "Alt-Right" movement "Terrorgram."[92] This specific subculture merges traditional Islamist/jihadi narratives with meme culture, gamer aesthetics, and content strategies tailored to engage adolescents on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram.[93]

The attacker was a highly active user of TikTok and Instagram, where he both consumed and created jihadi propaganda. His social media profiles featured Islamic State-related symbolism, martyrdom references, Qur'anic excerpts, and videos referencing the destruction of Israel and Western society.[94] Moustafa Ayad, a researcher focusing on the virtual dimension of jihadism, stated in an interview with the Swiss daily *Tagesanzeiger* that he had never seen an attacker like the one in Zurich who was so directly connected to the online ecosystem of salafism and the visual world of Islamogram.[95] In Ayad's view, the case of the Zurich teenage perpetrator confirmed what his study suggested: This disturbing online matrix could have catastrophic consequences in reality.[96]

The attacker's online activity revealed frequent interaction with content from jihadi influencers, as well as aestheticized propaganda videos set to *nasheeds*, interspersed with memes that mocked Western values and glorified violence against non-Muslims, particularly Jews.[97] This style of content is characteristic of "Alt-Jihad"—a decentralized, digitally native form of extremist expression that appeals to digitally literate Gen Z users by using

humor, cultural references, and simplified theological rhetoric.[d] Swiss investigators also discovered that the boy had begun to produce his own content,[98] reposting jihadi videos and even creating "remixed" TikToks that adapted Islamic State propaganda into stylized edits specifically for his peer teenagers audience. These included short videos with motivational captions about "fighting injustice," condemning "Zionists," and presenting the attacker's religious identity as incompatible with Western life.

What is particularly concerning about this case is the apparent absence of direct personal contact with jihadi recruiters. The teenager appears to have radicalized entirely online, in what Swiss security services described as a "closed-loop digital ecosystem" of echo chambers and extremist comment threads.[99] Investigators linked his radicalization timeline to online exposure to jihadi content during the Gaza conflict escalation post-October 7, 2023, during which he increasingly engaged with accounts promoting antisemitic and violent rhetoric.[100] The suspect had also joined private group chats on Instagram and Telegram, where users shared pro-Islamic State memes, antisemitic tropes, and glorifications of lone-actor attacks.[101]

Vienna, Austria – Thwarted Islamic State-Inspired Attack on Taylor Swift Concert (August 2024)

In August 2024, Austrian authorities foiled a jihadi-inspired terrorist plot targeting a Taylor Swift concert in Vienna, one of the highest-profile entertainment events of the summer.[102] The three suspects, aged between 17 and 19, were arrested before they could carry out the attack, which, according to investigators, was intended to cause mass casualties and garner maximum media attention in the name of the Islamic State, specifically Islamic State Khorasan.[103]

The TikTok radicalization aspect of the foiled Taylor Swift concert attack in Vienna in August 2024 is a textbook example of how jihadi propaganda increasingly leverages youth-focused platforms to manipulate and mobilize vulnerable individuals.[104] According to his own testimony, the main suspect, Beran A., a 19-year-old with Macedonian-Albanian roots, was radicalized in part by regularly consuming TikTok videos of the aforementioned German salafi preacher Abul Baraa, the charismatic influencer on the platform.[105] His TikTok content—stylized, youth-focused, and emotionally charged—served as an accessible entrance point to more hardcore jihadi ideology, including videos glorifying violence and martyrdom.

It seems that Beran A. did not merely consume this content passively. Inspired by such material and driven by a personal crisis that included social alienation and mental health issues, he fully embraced jihadi ideology.[106] In his own words during interrogation, he had "dedicated his life to Allah" and advocated for sharia law

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d   Alt-jihadis blend far-right culture war narratives with support for jihadi groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, al-Qa`ida, and the Islamic State. While they glorify 9/11 as proof of Western vulnerability, many also embrace conspiratorial "truther" narratives blaming Jews or Western elites. Ideologically inconsistent, they denounce white supremacists yet flirt with ethno-state rhetoric. What unites them is a toxic, viral-ready rejection of liberalism, multiculturalism, and democratic values. See Scott Atran, "Alt-Right or jihad? Unleashed by globalisation's dark side and the collapse of communities, radical Islam and the alt-Right share a common cause," AEON, November 6, 2017; Moustafa Ayad, "Teenage Terrorists and the Digital Ecosystem of the Islamic State," *CTC Sentinel* 18:2 (2025); and Moustafa Ayad, "An 'Alt-Jihad' is rising on social media," Wired, December 8, 2021.

while distancing himself from "sinful" peers.[107] This process of ideological transformation was definitely facilitated by TikTok's algorithmic amplification, which exposed him to increasingly radical material.[108] He eventually pledged allegiance to the Islamic State via Telegram and began tactical preparations for a mass-casualty attack.[109]

When Beran A. transitioned to Telegram, he allegedly coordinated operational details, sought weapons, and communicated with other extremists.[110] Nevertheless, based upon what is known about his background, TikTok served as the initial ideological vector.[111] This example starkly illustrates how "hipster Salafism"[112] and borderline content[113]—mixing memes, slang, and pop culture— is exhibited on platforms like TikTok attempting to reach Gen Z audiences. Such content is often difficult to moderate because it appears initially benign or coded. But it regularly serves as an ideological "on ramp," directing viewers to more radical material on encrypted platforms.[114] Sometimes, it is directly by means of QR codes leading to "closed" Telegram groups.[115]

Solingen, Germany – Knife Attack at City Festival (August 2024)

On August 24, 2024, the German city of Solingen—ironically renowned for its blade manufacturing—became the scene of a deadly jihadi knife attack.[116] During the "Festival of Diversity," held to commemorate the city's 650th anniversary, 26-year-old Syrian asylum seeker Issa Al H. launched a stabbing attack on festival visitors, killing three people and injuring eight others—many of whom sustained severe wounds to the neck and upper body.[117]

According to federal prosecutors, Issa Al H. was driven by radical Islamist convictions and sought to kill as many "unbelievers" as possible.[118] Prior to the attack, he reportedly recorded a video pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State and sent it to a contact associated with the terrorist group, indicating pre-meditation and ideological alignment.[119] In initial statements to investigators, Issa Al H. framed the attack as an act of religious duty, declaring that those attending the multicultural festival were enemies of Islam.

The assault bore hallmarks of Islamic State-inspired lone actor terrorism. Prosecutors, however, claim that prior to the enabled attack, he reached out to Islamic State affiliates via jihadi social media channels, where he allegedly received support in planning the assault and selecting the weapon used to carry out the killing.[120] Undoubtedly, the attack fits the broader pattern of digitally mediated radicalization without direct organizational involvement. Investigators believe he had contact via chat with an unknown jihadi entrepreneur with a *nom de guerre* "Abu Faruq," who could have served as facilitator.

It is worth noting that the Solingen attack marks the first instance since the 2016 Berlin Breitscheidplatz Christmas market vehicle-ramming attack that the Islamic State officially issued a statement of responsibility for a terrorist act on German soil.[121] In its Solingen communiqué, promulgated via its Amaq channel, the Islamic State explicitly referenced the situation in Gaza.[122]

Investigations revealed that Issa Al H. had consumed extensive amounts of jihadi propaganda on platforms such as YouTube, but also on TikTok and ultimately Telegram, including videos that glorified martyrdom, justified attacks against civilians, and promoted Islamic State narratives of vengeance and religious duty.[123] German intelligence services confirmed that his radicalization occurred primarily online and in isolation, with short videos playing a notable role in the early stages. From at least June 2024 onward, he immersed himself in jihadi ideology, particularly consuming propaganda from al-Qa`ida.[124] He watched videos of Usama bin Ladin, listened to podcasts linked to the Islamic State, and installed software on his smartphone that allowed him to access jihadi forums anonymously.[125] Telegram probably played a central role in his radicalization. He followed jihadi channels, and allegedly, he even created his own channel on the platform in February 2024.[126] According to investigators, he is believed to have shared Islamic State-related videos—such as beheading footage—and published Islamist propaganda, although apparently without much response.

It was reportedly the Gaza conflict that further radicalized Issa Al H., according to his own messages. He allegedly searched online for locations such as the Israeli embassy in Berlin, a chapel in Cologne, and a German military training ground—possibly as potential targets.[127] On one of these channels, Al H. received advice on how to behave covertly.[128] In his confession video, he vowed "revenge for our people" and referred to himself as a "soldier of the IS."[129] Al H.'s consumption of Islamic State propaganda material is believed to have reinforced his extremist worldviews and specifically intensified his hostility toward secular and pluralistic societies, such as that symbolized by the festival in Solingen.[130]

The attack also reignited national debate over immigration enforcement and deportation policy. Al H.'s asylum claim in Germany had been rejected, and he was scheduled for deportation to Bulgaria—his first country of entry into the European Union under the Dublin Regulation.[131] However, like many failed asylum seekers, he evaded removal, reportedly due to bureaucratic obstacles and the lack of travel documents.[132] Following the attack, then German Chancellor Olaf Scholz vowed to introduce stricter knife laws, speed up deportation processes for rejected asylum seekers, and strengthen the powers of immigration enforcement.[133]

Villach, Austria – Knife Attack (February 2025)

Just days after a 14-year-old, who allegedly had been rapidly radicalized after watching Islamist videos on TikTok, was arrested on February 10, 2025, in Vienna for planning an Islamist-motivated attack on a train station,[134] a deadly jihadi-inspired knife attack took place on February 15 in Villach, Carinthia. There, 23-year-old Syrian asylum seeker Ahmad G. randomly assaulted passersby with a folding knife near the Draubrücke bridge.[135] A 14-year-old boy was killed, and five others were injured, some critically. Witnesses reported hearing "Allahu Akbar," and Ahmad G. later declared allegiance to the Islamic State.[136]

A search of his apartment revealed jihadi writings, an improvised Islamic State flag using black plastic trash bags, and evidence of frequent consumption of extremist propaganda, particularly via social media.[137] Authorities concluded that he had undergone a rapid and largely isolated process of online radicalization, primarily through consumption of radical Islamist TikTok content.[138] According to his own statement, his turn toward jihadism occurred within just three months, heavily influenced by salafi influencer preachers.[139] He told investigators that a specific Islamist propaganda video, viewed four days before the attack, served as the decisive trigger.[140]

This pattern of online radicalization has repeatedly been observed across Europe and is clearly exemplified by the Villach case.

It also raises the issue of "stochastic terrorism"[e]—a form of indirect incitement where mass-distributed extremist content increases the likelihood of violent acts, even without explicit calls to action.[141] This tactic, which can be extended to manifestations of jihadi violence, relies on suggestive messaging, broadly disseminated across digital platforms, where vulnerable individuals interpret and act on the content independently.[142]

Ahmad G. had recorded a pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State on the morning of the assault but did not publish it, assuming he would die in the attack and that the video would be released posthumously.[143] During his arrest, he showed no remorse, reportedly taunting police officers and smiling while raising his index finger in the *tawhid* gesture—a symbol widely used in jihadi iconography.[144] His apprehension was made possible by the swift intervention of a Syrian-born food delivery driver, who used his vehicle to stop the attacker.[145] During interrogations, Ahmad G. told authorities he saw himself as a "warrior of the Islamic State" and had planned the attack earlier that day.[146] His case has since become emblematic of hybrid or dual radicalization,[147] where online jihadi narratives fuse with personal crises and real-life encounters, leading to sudden acts of targeted violence.[148] [f] The Villach attack has sparked intense public debate in Austria over preventive counterterrorism measures, surveillance of the asylum system,[149] and the growing threat posed by digitally radicalized lone actors.

Ahmad G.'s radicalization trajectory illustrates how the virtualization strategy—consistent with the "virtual caliphate" approach—profoundly affects the terrorist threat landscape.[150] It lowers the threshold for entry into extremism, complicates surveillance, and allows for asymmetric mobilization, even in the absence of organizational structures. It also fosters "do-it-yourself jihadis" who radicalize online, act autonomously, and can mobilize sometimes even within weeks. The phenomenon has taken on a hydra-like manifestation—each incident giving rise to new expressions, echoes, and imitations across digital platforms.

Almost immediately after the attack, TikTok saw a wave of posts that either endorsed, referenced, or framed the act within a broader jihadi narrative, demonstrating how online ecosystems not only reflect but actively amplify acts of terrorism.[g] This digital resonance underscores the self-replicating nature of contemporary jihadi propaganda, where one act can rapidly generate ideological validation, aesthetic celebration, and emotional mobilization in real time. For example, a TikTok user with over 2,000 followers shared a picture of the grinning attacker, tagging it in Arabic with "#Mosul #Austria_Vienna #Syrian_in_Austria" and adding a soundtrack.

This posting illustrates vividly how the radicalization spiral on TikTok unfolds.

In the comments section, users praised the attacker, writing phrases such as "May God release him from captivity"—a common jihadi expression. Another commenter referred to him as a "brother in tawhid." The TikTok account was linked to an Instagram profile featuring an Islamic State-produced video glorifying suicide bombers as "frontline warriors of death." Suggested TikTok content included *nasheeds*, stories from early Islamic history accompanied by Islamic State imagery, prayer calls, anti-Western clips like "Lost in the land of disbelief," and even a football-themed video. Ahmad G. exemplifies the currently prevailing profile of contemporary jihadi lone actors: a young, unemployed male asylum seeker originally from a conflict zone—socially isolated and radicalized online via TikTok.

Part IV: Cross-Case-Analysis - Common Radicalization Patterns

The examined attack cases share key features of TikTok-facilitated radicalization: All involve young, digitally native perpetrators—predominantly under 25—who were exposed to emotionally charged radical Islamist content on TikTok. Further online engagement, often algorithmically reinforced, escalated into more extreme material and led some to migrate to encrypted platforms such as Telegram. European lone attackers/attack plotters typically lacked ties to organized terrorist groups, pointing to immersive self-radicalization. Several among them consumed Islamic State-style propaganda that glorified revenge, martyrdom, and violence, with their opportunistic attacks reflecting an increasingly decentralized threat landscape.

Young Age, Digital Isolation, and Ideological Drift

Across almost all presented attack scenarios, perpetrators, plotters, or suspects were notably young, typically in their teens to early twenties, reflecting an alarming trend of youth radicalization. For instance, thwarted attack plots such as the one focusing on the Vienna Taylor Swift concert involved suspects aged 15, 17, and 19, while the Vienna Pride Parade plot included a 14-year-old suspect among the other conspirators. These cases suggest that attack plans involving teenagers may be more likely to be intercepted at an earlier stage, possibly due to operational inexperience or heightened digital visibility of their communications. The Brussels shooter, a 45-year-old Tunisian, was an outlier, but his radicalization was also digitally mandated.

Young age correlates with vulnerability to online extremist content due to identity formation and emotional predisposition. Prolonged isolation and excessive digital immersion—intensified by post-COVID social fragmentation—emerged as key factors in increased susceptibility to online extremist narratives. Many suspects, such as those in Zurich and Solingen, were described as socially withdrawn, spending extensive time online. The Zurich attacker, a 15-year-old Swiss Tunisian, and the Solingen perpetrator, a 26-year-old Syrian, exhibited signs of self-radicalization via online platforms, drifting toward Islamic State-inspired ideology fragments. TikTok's appealing and emotive format lowers barriers to radical content, making its short videos a potent tool for recruitment and mobilization.

TikTok and Short-Form Content as Emotional Gateway

TikTok emerged (among several others, including Instagram and

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e   This term is, in current academic debates, usually limited to cases of right-wing extremism and/or conspiracy-driven extremist violence. See James Angove, "Stochastic terrorism: critical reflections on an emerging concept," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 17:1 (2024): pp. 21-43; Mark S. Hamm and Ramón Spaaij, *The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); and Karina Biondi and Jennifer Curtis, "From Structural to Stochastic Violence," Association for Political and Legal Anthropology, 2018.

f   A recent psychiatric evaluation confirmed that his actions were not due to mental illness, but were ideologically motivated, and he was deemed fit to stand trial. The Klagenfurt public prosecutor's office continues to treat the incident as a lone-actor attack. See Manuela Kaiser, "Terroranschlag in Villach: Syrer war bei Tat zurechnungsfähig," *Kleine Zeitung*, May 20, 2025, and "Villach-Anschlag: Attentäter fühlte sich 'stark' und stach zu," PULS24 News, May 8, 2025.

g   A similar dynamic has been observed in far-right extremist circles. See Amarnath Amarasingam, Marc-André Argentino, and Graham Macklin, "The Buffalo Attack: The Cumulative Momentum of Far-Right Terror," *CTC Sentinel* 15:7 (2022).

YouTube) as a critical platform for radicalization, particularly in the presented Viennese cases. Its short-form, algorithm-driven content served as an emotional gateway, amplifying extremist narratives through engaging, bite-sized videos. In the Vienna Pride Parade plot, the 14-year-old suspect was exposed to jihadi TikTok content glorifying violence. Similarly, the Taylor Swift plot suspects allegedly consumed videos of salafi online influencer preachers and Islamic State propaganda on TikTok, which emotionally charged their radicalization process. TikTok's algorithm prioritizes user engagement and creates echo chambers by recommending increasingly radical/extreme content based on prior interactions.[151] This mechanism exploits emotional vulnerabilities, particularly among susceptible teenagers like the Viennese Pride, the Zurich or the Taylor Swift plotters, fostering rapid ideological shifts.[152] Unlike platforms such as Meta or YouTube where illicit content removal has become relatively effective, TikTok has not yet achieved comparable standards.

Hybridization of Lone Actor Terrorism and Virtual Community Support

The selected cases illustrate a hybridization of lone actor terrorism and virtual community support, blurring traditional distinctions between solitary and group-based violent extremism. While perpetrators such as the Brussels shooter and Solingen attacker acted alone in terms of tactics, their radicalization was strongly supported by online communities. The Brussels suspect consumed Islamic State propaganda online and interacted with peers on closed channels, while the Solingen attacker engaged with extremist forums.

In the Viennese plots, suspects collaborated in small, digitally connected cells, coordinating via encrypted platforms such as Telegram but (allegedly) radicalizing through open platforms such as TikTok. Virtual communities provided ideological reinforcement, tactical knowledge, and emotional validation, reducing the isolation typically associated with lone actors. This hybridization is evident in the Zurich case, where the teenage attacker, though acting alone, drew inspiration from global jihadi networks online. The interplay of lone action and virtual support enhances the unpredictability and scalability of threats, as individuals can radicalize independently but draw on collective resources.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

The cross-case analysis identifies a recurring radicalization pattern: young, socially isolated individuals drawn into extremism via TikTok's emotionally charged content, driven by perceived injustices, and reinforced through virtual peer networks. Key risk factors include emotional vulnerability, algorithmic overexposure, and digital isolation. Effective P/CVE strategies must address these dimensions by aligning with the digital behaviors and identity needs of susceptive adolescents. Early-stage interventions—capable of detecting non-violent but ideologically loaded content—are essential. This demands greater digital literacy among educators and parents, alongside support structures for disengagement. At the

> "The interplay of lone action and virtual support enhances the unpredictability and scalability of threats, as individuals can radicalize independently but draw on collective resources."

policy level, stronger enforcement of content moderation/removal and algorithmic transparency under the European Union's Digital Services Act is critical. Public-private partnerships and investments in counter-narratives are vital to disrupt the online ecosystems in which radicalization proliferates.

Strengthening AI-based Early Warning Systems in Digital Environments: The centrality of platforms such as TikTok and Telegram in recent radicalization trajectories—e.g., Vienna and Zurich—underscores the need for robust, AI-supported early warning capabilities. Governments and security agencies should develop real-time monitoring tools to detect behavioral indicators such as increased interaction with extremist content or migration to encrypted platforms, as seen in the Vienna Taylor Swift concert plot. Collaboration with open-source intelligence (OSINT) communities can further enhance detection capacities, potentially averting attacks like the one in Solingen.

Counter-Radicalization and Digital Literacy for Youth: Given the young age profile of many suspects (14-19), counter-radicalization efforts must prioritize adolescent-focused interventions. Integrating digital literacy into school curricula can help students critically assess online content and recognize manipulative algorithmic patterns. Community initiatives such as mentorship programs may mitigate social withdrawal, while counter-narrative campaigns—culturally tailored and delivered via youth-relevant platforms—can offer positive alternatives. Engaging trusted figures like moderate religious leaders and local influencers enhances credibility and reach.

Platform Accountability and Algorithm Transparency: TikTok's function as an emotional entry point into extremist ecosystems highlights the urgency of platform accountability. The DSA should be rigorously applied to ensure algorithmic transparency and the timely removal of extremist content. Regular audits of moderation practices and the development of AI tools to flag borderline content—without infringing on free expression—are essential. Initiatives such as the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) and Tech Against Terrorism (TAT) provide best-practice models for cross-platform collaboration, industry standards, and threat intelligence sharing, thereby supporting both tech companies and law enforcement in addressing digital radicalization while upholding fundamental rights.   CTC

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